

Rain like this was a rarity this deep in the Lowlands, but the weather wasn't anything if not suitably dramatic. Dark clouds churned with wind and stars, forced to life every now and then by flashes of vicious lightning that burst across the sky.

Underneath the storm sat a house, a decrepit, two-story relic tucked into the remnants of the outer suburbs. The pink siding and shattered roof tiles betrayed its age as something older than most people currently living, for it hailed from a different era, when building codes were mere suggestions and when the war had drained away all the good material and the men who could work it. The city had scheduled it for demolition years ago, but strangely, it remained standing. The sole survivor among an otherwise desolate neighborhood, the old house up on the hill as it was called.

Every window was boarded up. Two-by-fours had been nailed across both the interior and exterior frames, with the back door equally sealed shut. An order to vacate was stapled to the front entrance, but it went unnoticed. Flapping uselessly in the growing breeze. The entire place looked abandoned. No lights, no movement. No life. At least, none that belonged.

Headlights swept across the structure. Meredith Hale pulled her faded blue truck into the crumbling driveway just as the first drops of rain began tapping against the windshield. The emergency broadcast system buzzed on the radio, confirming what she already knew: the first monsoon of the season had arrived. Just one of many to come. Above her, a red light pulsed in the sky. Unnoticed, but still there. Silently hovering beneath the dark gray clouds.

She killed the ignition and stepped out of the rattling truck, pressing a couple of grocery bags to her chest as she shuffled toward the front door. Her teal scrubs clung in the humidity, and her fingers fumbled the keys from a reel on her side as she forced the line out and

toward the waiting lock. No husband awaited her. No kids. This was how she spent the better part of her life. Just her, her work, and this house. A never-ending cycle.

Meredith crossed the linoleum transition, low-ankle boots squeaking softly against the thin floor. But as she made her way into the foyer, something gave her pause. Someone was watching her. A shape. A shadow. Over there, in the pitch-black doorway to her study. Rain pattered hard against the single-pane windows as she considered her options. Though there weren't many at the moment. Her brown ponytail swayed back and forth as she glanced between the front door, the stairs to the second-level bedroom, and the dark kitchen beside her. Traces of water collected at her feet.

The grocery bags hit the counter with a grunt. Plastic rustled as she sorted through them, humming to herself, a hand trailing off to the side. A flash of blue flickered across her eyes. Like a light from somewhere unseen.

She suddenly snapped on her heels. A knife was in her grasp, thrown into the study. It stuck against one of the shelves with a harsh twang, sending wood fibers flying. But the shadow was already gone.

A shuffle to the side made her eyes widen. The figure grabbed onto her. Impossibly fast. She felt their wool gloves. Their pressure, their weight, pushing her against the counter. She swung at them, but they caught the fist and sent it low, blocking her in. Meredith yelled out and dropped down, forcing the figure over her hip and breaking their hold. Their neck was in the crux of her arm for a moment, but the figure twisted free with an inhuman grace, flipping forwards on their hands and landing back on their feet.

Meredith rushed forward. She lashed out into the dark with wide strikes, with the figure effortlessly parrying her blows as she closed in. The intruder slipped away and shadowed her movements,

pulling out drawers and cupboards as they both circled the kitchen island, forcing Merideth to navigate a moving maze of cutlery and cabinetries that she could barely see through.

She stopped short. Grabbed her toaster oven. It was sent toward the shadow with a loud crash. Followed by an air fryer. Finally, a blender. A spatula was in her hand for half a second before being flung into the light switch. The singular floor lamp in the living room clicked to life, which did little to help her situation.

Undeterred, Meredith planted both hands on the counter and vaulted feet first into the intruder, her boots crashing into their braced forearms and sending them back. She twirled, snatching a cast-iron pan from the stove and shooting forwards once more. She swung at the intruder multiple times, shouting as she did. But the figure continued to evade her. Testing her. Measuring. Always too close or too far, awkwardly spaced as if predicting her every movement. They parried the final swing and twisted the woman's momentum toward the floor. She yanked him down with her, but he simply rolled upright, springing to his feet and stepping back.

She moved opposite to him, breathing hard as she held the pan out like a blade. When they made no further movements, she palmed the wall beside her and finally flicked the kitchen lights on. What she saw didn't surprise her in the slightest.

"I always wondered when you'd come for me... *Keeper of Man*," she growled. No doubt or fear in her voice.

The Prophet stepped forward. His eyes went alight with his power, head cocked. "You know why I am here?"

Her face was cast in harsh blue. "I believe so."

"Okay. Then could you please put down the—"

Six pounds of cast iron whistled past his head. He ducked smoothly, the edge grazing his hood as it clanged against the

backsplash. When he looked back, she was already at a drawer, fingers digging desperately for something. A nickel-plated derringer briefly flashed in her hand. She leveled it at him, cocking the hammer back.

He surged forward, seizing her wrist before she could pull the trigger.

“Let’s not do that,” he warned, twisting the weapon free and decisively uncocking the hammer. “Please don’t shoot me.”

She pulled away, yanking two steak knives free from the wooden block to her right, twirling them in her hands. The Prophet sighed. Then, he crouched back, perception slowing as he sucked in a sizable breath of air and held it fast.

The next instant, he shot forward. Meredith tried to intercept him with a blade, but he slipped around it, striking her chest, side, then neck. Minimal force, targeting only her nerves. Just enough to deaden her right side and collapse her stance. The knives slipped from her hands and clattered to the linoleum.

Meredith gasped as she tried to stand on her shaking feet but was otherwise helpless as the Prophet closed in on her. Her face went dark, expecting the worst. Instead, the Prophet held her up as she fell and carefully guided her back into the dining room. Then, he pulled a chair out with his foot and gently helped her to sit down.

A blue glow intensified in his eyes for a moment, coalescing around his pupils as he stood before her. She grit her teeth, one arm draped around her torso. She really was as unremarkable in person as she had been on paper. But the eyes were unmistakable. It was her, no doubt.

The Keeper of Man said nothing. He only reached forward and laid a healing hand on her shoulder. The aether was enough to kill any pain she had, but it did nothing for her dead limbs.

“Let’s talk,” he said.

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The Keeper of Man let his energy subside, just enough for the overhead light to kick back on. The buzz of it filled the silence.

Meredith's eyes glanced at the blade hilt strapped to his hip.

"If you're going to kill me..." she spat, hands falling limp into her lap, "...just make it quick."

"If I'm trying to hurt you, I'm doing a terrible job of it," the Prophet softly replied, shaking his head as he moved around his host. "Besides, I could never harm someone with such beautiful eyes as yours."

A large, vintage record console was pressed against the wall, sitting between two square windows. He set the derringer down on top of the wooden paneling and looked it over. It was probably as old as the house and styled just the same. Speakers were built into the front, with records piled in a cabinet bolted to the wall in front of him. It spanned his entire field of view. Thousands, if he were to guess. He ran his gloved finger along the selection, before landing on an older arrangement that he recognized from the spine alone. Blue and orange.

"Sebastian Mayday. Soul for the Unruly Soul," he whispered. One of his favorites. He went to pull it out, but paused, his fingers curling up. He looked over to Meredith.

"Do you mind?" he asked. The woman gave no response. "Music always helps to calm me down," he said, slipping the vinyl out of its sleeve and placing it gently onto the player. "Let me know if you feel otherwise."

He flicked the analog switch, and after a soft crackle from the stylus dropping, it automatically began playing. A sad piano started up, echoed in kind by the rain pelting the house in a strange duet of man and nature. The atmosphere was palpable. And the derringer was back in his hand.

He pulled out a chair, stepped onto it, and summited the wooden table. The Prophet then brought himself down cross-legged in front of Merideth, mask pulled away so she could see the features on his gray face; so she could see that he meant no harm. With the orange light above lining his figure, he turned the derringer over in his hand. Not holding it by the grip, but by the barrel as if weighing it.

“Rudy three-fifty-seven,” he commented, reading the markings on the side. The Keeper clicked the weapon open in front of her and dumped the rounds onto the table. Then, like a cat pawing at a toy, he slowly swept the brass across the wood—once, twice, and three times again until both cartridges finally clattered to the ground below. The empty weapon stayed in his hands.

“Sorry for the surprise visit,” he quietly offered. “And for breaking into your home. And for attacking you. And for doing... all this.” He gestured with the derringer. Not toward Meredith, of course. “I had to be certain that you are what I think you are.” He let out a breath. Sharp and controlled. “I hope you can forgive my trespass, and perhaps you can also help me to understand. But why would an acolyte of the Order go into hiding under a false identity?”

Meredith scoffed. “You think that I’m an acolyte?”

“I don’t think,” he said softly, tapping his chest. “I know.”

The music swelled for a moment. And she smiled. “Well, I’m sorry to break your heart, but I’m not even part of the Order. Not anymore. I gave that up a long time ago.”

“You... left the Order?” he said, incredulously. “I have never heard of an acolyte doing that before.”

“It wasn’t easy. But given everything that happened, I really had no choice.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

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“Of course you don’t, Keeper of Man.” She huffed. Voice strained. “Like the rest of them you have to keep up the lie. Pretend you did it all for the greater good of the People. Willful ignorance in the face of genocide. But that’s okay. I’ve made my peace with it. I simply pray for better days. That helps the worst of it.” She leaned over to the side, face twitching. “Now... do whatever it is you came here to do.”

The Keeper of Man blinked. He genuinely, and utterly, had zero idea as to what Meredith was talking about. But the intensity in her words was harrowing. So, he treaded lightly.

“I only wish to find out what happened to the Keeper of Tyler. Nothing more.”

Meredith blinked hard, orange flashing in her eyes for a moment.

“Well, I wish you weren’t here right now,” she admitted. “Know this. I’m taking whatever I know about the Messiah to the grave. That was my final oath to the Tylerists, forced by the hand of the Keeper Herself. So, either stop wasting my time, or get the hell out of my house.”

The Keeper of Man placed the pistol down between them and folded his gloved hands, pressing the wool digits against his chin.

“What is it going to take,” he softly asked, “to get you to tell me the truth?”

—

A set of white headlights flared on the distant horizon. Then two. Then three. Piercing through the thickening storm. They moved fast, rumbling down the highway in tight formation, two unassuming matte-black SUVs flanking a single armored cargo van. They didn’t blare sirens, or shine emergency lights. They had no insignia, no

designations of any kind, and, if not for the streetlights, it would've been difficult to say if they were even there at all.

Inside the van, cloaked in the low pulse of emergency red, a squad of shock troops stood, eerily still. A blackout team. Seven in total, including the driver and passenger in the front. Clad in sleek, angular armor from head to toe, their bodies moved only with the hiss of respirators and the low hum of servo-driven exo-limbs. Frosted white visors concealed their faces inside shock-proof helmets while light bent around their dark armor with the faintest hints of energy. In their hands, a combination of carbines, rifles, and larger automatic weapons were slung against their chests. Hard to make out clearly in the dim red. But definitively lethal.

The suspension of the van soaked up every imperfection in the wet pavement as they turned off the highway, the vehicles slipping single file into the empty streets of the barren suburb. The headlights were cut, and the supercharged V12s disengaged. Electric motors in the tires took over and propelled them silently forwards, while infrared scanners flicked to life, slaved into the driver's display. The target location awaited them, just up the road. Just through the storm that grew worse by the second.

Above them, that same red light hovered as their eyes in the sky. The quadcopter remained stable despite the horrid wind, blades slicing through the rain as it tracked the vehicles closing in on the house. *Five hundred meters. Four-ninety. Four-eighty...*

Firearms were made ready with a series of metallic sounds as bolts slammed into place. Behind them, the largest of the weapons came online. Four barrels, each three feet in length, slowly rotated within a rectangular chassis, ticking rapidly as high caliber rounds were fed from an attached ammo belt.

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A radio chirped, an encrypted burst of garbled tones piped directly into their helmets. Combination night vision and thermal filters switched on. Combat stimulants were retrieved from pouches on their chest rigs. They were tubular devices of gray and white, with a transparent cap on the front protecting a thick needle. They each clicked the rear dial to the activation point. Then, in unison, they twisted the tops free and pressed the stims to their forearms. None of them made a sound.

—

Back in the house on the hill, things had not progressed much between the Keeper of Man and his host. He had offered everything he could think of in exchange for cooperation: gold, credits, blessings, muffins, even heartfelt appeals to Tyler Himself bounced off the stubborn woman like water off his own uniform. She only repeated her one demand in between the chords of the gloomy piano and rain: for him to exit her home and leave her in peace.

“I don’t understand,” the Prophet began, pouring a dark liquid into a short, ribbed glass. He offered it forward, and Meredith drank without complaint. The bourbon went down easy as expected, since he had pulled it from one of the bags on the counter. In fact, alcohol seemed to be the only food-related item she owned. “Don’t you wish to help me find the Messiah? Is there nothing I can offer to loosen your tongue?” He set the glass aside, staying cross-legged on the tabletop. But true to her word, Meredith said nothing further.

The Keeper tapped his fingers against the hardwood table, completely at a loss. He bit down on a gloved digit with his sharp teeth, thinking it over. None of this made any sense. Unless...

“I believe...” he muttered, glove still in his mouth. “That you are resisting because you’re under some kind of duress.”

“I am very much under duress.”

“No. Not because of me. There is something else.” He watched her closely. “What are you so afraid of?”

The twitch in her eyes said everything.

He leaned in, hands to his side. “What if I gave you my word that no harm would come to you? That no force on this planet would touch you?”

Meredith shook her head.

“You can’t make that promise,” she retorted. “Nobody can.”

“Why not?”

“Because the damage is already done.”

“I don’t suppose I could offer restitution?”

“This isn’t something your magic can fix. No, the only peace I’ll find is in the afterlife.”

The Prophet blew out a breath. He closed his eyes and dropped his head, taking in the music as a slow, jazzy horn was overlaid atop the piano. And though Meredith may have found it long and awkward, the Keeper simply enjoyed the company.

“Do you seriously plan to stay here all night?” she eventually sighed.

“That depends. Are you prepared to tell me the truth?”

She scoffed, leaning back.

“You seem awfully sure of yourself, so why bother asking?” She tilted her head; eyes locked on him. “C’mon. Do what you’ve got to do. Force the answers out of me.”

His head remained lowered. Nodding in rhythm with the beat, his armaments clicking softly. Sure, he could have flooded her with his energy like the men at the statue, but Meredith was no mere mage. He

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certainly had more extreme measures he could resort to, but just thinking about it made him feel sick.

“No, thank you,” he replied. “I would like to avoid that if possible.”

“Then you realize you are doomed, right?” She slowly sat up, fighting her dead arms and legs. The Prophet placed a hand on the derringer, though she made no move for it. “As soon as I can walk again, I’m going right out that door and heading straight to the police. I’ll tell them you broke into my home and attacked me. I’ll—”

“You really shouldn’t.”

“I’ll tell them exactly what you’ve done here. I’ll tell them everything! I don’t think the High Circle would be too happy to find out that their Keeper of Man has assaulted a Tylerist pilgrim?”

He had no response. To which she mocked:

“What’s wrong? Don’t you care about the People anymore? The greater good?”

His gloved hands went to his face in frustration. What part of *Do No Harm* did people not understand?

“You have two options,” she said, calm and resolute. “Either you walk away and maybe we forget this whole thing even happened,” she shrugged, “or you do what you have to do to get your answers.” Her hand lifted slightly, gesturing toward the living room. “We both know what option you’re going to take, Keeper of Man. So, unless there’s anything else, I need you to leave.”

Outside, lightning rolled across the sky, accompanied by a boom of thunder. The Keeper said nothing. His head hung low, shoulders drawn in. He didn’t move a single muscle. Instead, the Prophet studied his host in silence, peering through his gloved digits. He searched for some hidden signal, some unspoken plea, but found nothing behind her eyes. Nothing that would clue him in. But he

wouldn't harm her, not without cause. He knew that. She knew that. Which left only one option.

And so, he pushed himself to the side. Dangled his thin, socked legs over the edge of the table, and then dropped down to the squeaky floor below. He mumbled an apology, stepped past the increasingly arrogant looking Meredith, and trudged over to the front door. The floor lamp highlighted him in a dull yellow glow as he stood there, waiting. Waiting for what, he didn't know. Some guidance or pull, or perhaps, someone to tell him what to do. But he heard nothing. Just the growing certainty that whatever lay beyond that doorway, past the storm, wind, and rain, would grant him no further peace. Only one thing registered through the noise. The cold brush of the locket against his skin. That small piece of the Messiah that was always with him. That singular purpose he carried now, held above his heart.

The Keeper of Man gave a series of labored breaths. Unsure, and unhappy. Then, as if his hands were moving on their own, his hood was pulled back over his head. Without thinking, without remorse, he slowly turned back toward his host. And stepped away from the door.

Meredith's arrogance dropped instantly as the Keeper closed in, the light completely gone from his eyes. The music skipped a beat and went quiet. Replaced by static. He stopped just beside her and unclasped one of the pouches on his hip. A silver flask was withdrawn. The cap unscrewed. He hesitated, then took a sharp gulp. *Black Lithium*. It was just as horrid as the first go around, and equally as ineffective for him.

"Before we move forwards," he grimly spoke, pulling his mask back over his nose. "Is there anything more you wish to say?"

She slumped back. Shook her head. His shaking hands betrayed his emotions as he pressed the flask against her lips. She drank readily and took it much better than he did. But still, she did not

speak. The flask was calmly stowed, and the Keeper of Man walked to the far side of the table where he remained standing. His gaze was slowly brought back up. The blue in his eyes narrowed to terrifying pinpricks, zeroing in on Meredith.

“Please put your hands on the table,” he spoke.

That finally broke her spell.

“W—what?”

“I’m commanding you, as your Keeper, for you to put your hands on the table,” the Prophet repeated, slow, and deliberate.

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I will make you.”

Meredith hesitated, reluctant, like she already knew what was coming next. But slowly, with visible effort, she flattened her palms against the table. The Keeper of Man mirrored her, placing his own gloved hands on the hardwood in front of her. His aether stirred, a haze at first, before stretching outward, thin tendrils of light threading along the grain of the wood. The current moved toward the woman slowly, gently, as if testing her will. When it reached her fingers, it stuttered. Then it struck.

The energy surged forward, clamping down on her hands with an invisible force. Her fingers locked tight against the surface. And the bond was sealed. From her end of the connection, a wave of fear pulsed outward. The Prophet felt all of it.

“Think of this as a lie detector with consequences,” he explained. “Tell me the truth, and make this easy on both of us, please.”

Rain tapped ceaselessly against the hollow roof. The glow along the table pulsed faintly, the aetheric current tightening like a noose. All he wanted was the truth.

“Let’s start simple.” He inhaled once, steadily. “Am I the Keeper of Man? Simply nod for yes.”

She hesitated, then nodded.

The Prophet felt it immediately. The resonance through the bond confirmed it.

“Are we sitting in the living room?”

A shake of the head.

“Dining room?”

She nodded.

So far, so good.

The Prophet reached into his jacket. He withdrew the photographs, the same ones that had brought him here.

“This is you,” he said, unfolding them onto the table. “Yes or no?”

Meredith stared. Braced. A flash of orange rippled across her eyes. Like a reflection of some far-off light. Then, she shook her head.

*A lie.*

The bond flared. A violent pulse of aether surged across the table, snapping into her like electricity. Meredith jerked, gasping, but the energy held her fast. The light above them flickered wildly as her breath hitched, body trembling. The Keeper exhaled. He did not flinch, but the pain lanced through the connection and he felt every second of it.

“Please,” she begged, voice cracking as her composure suddenly faltered. “Please don’t do this. I was bluffing—I won’t say a word that you were here, I promise.”

“I can’t do that. Not until I have the truth.” He presented the picture again. “This is you?”

“Yes,” she managed.

“You’re an acolyte of the Messiah?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. One mystery down.

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“When the Messiah disappeared, She took the upper ranks of the Order with Her. Every archmage. Every acolyte. Gone. Vanished. Except you.” He leaned forward, voice barely above a whisper. “She left you behind. Why?”

Meredith’s mouth curled. “Go to hell.”

The aether surged again. The second shock hit harder than the first, like jamming a fork into an electrical socket. She convulsed, blue sparks dancing across her skin. A choked cry escaped as her body slammed back into the chair. She coughed and curled forward in pain. The Prophet grimaced. Eyes shut.

“I was... commanded by Her Highness...” Meredith gasped, each word clawing its way out. “To stay behind. Cover Her tracks. I cannot say any further.”

The Prophet’s voice cut through the dim, electric hum of the aether. “Acolyte,” he said, low and steady, “as the only Keeper still standing, I am commanding you otherwise. The Keeper of Tyler is missing. Tens of thousands of lives depend on us finding Her. You are *compelled* to follow my commands.”

Meredith’s head shook, but it was slow and strained. “Not... possible,” she rasped. “I can’t... I can’t...”

“Choose your words carefully,” he warned. “Do you know what has happened to the Messiah?”

“No,” Meredith whimpered. “She’s gone. I wasn’t there.”

A truth.

“Was She abducted? Taken? Did She leave of Her own accord?”

“She... moved certain pieces into position to stop a great evil. The Paysonians planned something terrible. Something unspeakable. Her disappearance was necessary.”

“I’m not looking for riddles,” the Keeper said, rubbing his eyes. “You’re telling me you know nothing about the Messiah’s disappearance?”

“I do not.”

His gloved hands were forced back onto the table. The bond surged. A blue cloud swirled in the air like a hurricane, with Meredith at the eye of the storm.

“What was the Order doing before She left?”

“You... have no right.”

The Prophet leaned in. “As the last of us left, I do. Hear me. Why was She spending so much time alone in Her temple?”

“We were... following orders.”

“What were these orders, exactly?”

Meredith hesitated, eyes closing. “She split them up. Fractured the Order to protect Her secrets. I... helped prepare the ritual. That is all I ever did. You must understand; we had no choice.”

“This ritual, what was it for?”

Meredith’s hands shook, still bound. Her quivering mouth opened—closed. Then:

“I don’t know!”

Another lie. Another horrible shock. It was the worst so far, driving spittle and blood from her mouth. Even the Prophet curled over, bile rising in his throat. Meredith groaned, jaw clenched tight, hands twitching, still locked in place by the aether. Tears streamed down her face, mirrored in kind by the Prophet. Though they were hidden beneath the hood.

“Stop... *please!*”

“The only way this can stop is with you,” the Keeper replied, before continuing. “The Paysonians have told me that the Messiah is responsible for the vanishing of over ten thousand human Souls. You

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are an acolyte. You are tied to the Messiah with a bond beyond blood. You have a greater duty than any simple Tylerist. You must answer.”

He closed in. Eyes wide with quiet desperation. The energy only grew stronger.

“We must answer. Look at me and tell me what the Paysonians are saying is false. Tell me that the Messiah has nothing to do with whatever this is that they’ve uncovered.”

Meredith met his gaze. Her face, weak and trembling, did not crack.

“She was involved. And it’s all your fault.”

The storm went still. The music stopped. Meredith’s voice was quieter now.

“We committed... atrocities. And it’s all because of you. You and your campaign of peace. That’s why I left. I couldn’t stomach watching it happen any longer. She made us promise—!”

Another flash of orange. Meredith keeled back, bucking against the chair. The Prophet’s own breathing was rapid, his sharp canines bared in confusion. Against his better judgment, he pressed harder.

“What atrocities?”

“I am forbidden!” More orange.

“What did She make you promise?”

“I... won’t.” Another blue shock.

“Meredith, why are you doing this? Please tell me the truth!”

“I... I...”

“What was Her promise?”

“I can’t...!”

Meredith’s body convulsed against the chair, lips twitching as if fighting to form words. The aether burned across the table like wildfire, crackling at the edges of her Soul. Her eyes rolled. Her breath stuttered. The energy built, higher and higher, rippling through the air

like unrestrained lightning. The light above them cracked and went bright. The record console screamed as it resonated with the aether, layered with awful tones of feedback as the hurricane finally reached its breaking point.

“I... can’t...!”

And then, the overhead lamp loudly shattered. Sparks and glass rained in tandem, blowing apart on the wooden surface as the table cracked in half and fell in on itself. The only sources of light came from the sapphire flames atop the smoldering wreckage, separating the frazzled Keeper and his shuddering host, both laid out. Both completely spent and exhausted. The record player turned on once more and began skipping on the final notes of the vinyl. A droning saxophone. Again, and again. Like a heartbeat.

Meredith, still upright in the chair, had her hands go flat against her sides. Her eyes, bloodshot and drooping, locked onto his. And her voice, when it came, was not hers.

“She made us promise... to make you suffer.”

The air vanished from the room. The Prophet staggered back against the wall in disbelief, a hand to his face, pulse pounding in his ears.

“To make you suffer,” the voice repeated. “So, you would never find the truth. What we did at the Temple of Lowe deserves no forgiveness. She knew you could never handle it. She made certain to bury it. She... made me promise.”

The acolyte went limp. Her head lolled back in the chair. Steam rose from her body, but she was otherwise unresponsive. The Keeper’s breath hitched in his throat, held firm as the awful truth of what he had done settled in.

“Mer—Meredith?” he called. No answer.

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He clumsily shifted away from the wall, intent on helping the woman. But before he could do anything further, the aethereal web tugged at him once more. A sharp pang of alarm that forced his attention over everything else.

The Prophet sniffed and roughly wiped his face before willing forth his All-Sight. The ability was muted and hazy, even as he blinked away blue tears and glanced around in confusion. He scanned the house, unsure of what he was even looking for. But there. Past the living room... something was outside the front door. He couldn't tell what it was. It wasn't a Soul. It was almost like the complete absence of anything. A void where a Soul should be.

The lights across the house were abruptly shut off. The music stopped altogether. His heart jumped up into his throat.

"It's been a long night, hasn't it, Keeper of Man?" Meredith muttered from the table.

And the front door violently exploded.

